

INTERVIEW WITH BERNOLT PALAS
BY DOROTHE NORTON JUNE 5, 2002

MS. NORTON: It's nice to be here. I am happy to be here, and you seem to be in good health!

MR. PALAS: I am, and it's our good fortune that you could be here.

MS. NORTON: Thank you. Of course, I've told you why I am here to conduct this interview. And when we're done with the tape, then it will do in to Washington. And if you'd like to have a copy of it, they will send you a copy, because I don't transcribe them any more.

MR. PALAS: I would appreciate a copy.

MS. NORTON: O.K., very good. So, now we're going to be started. Can you tell me please your birthplace and the date?

MR. PALAS: My birthplace was Luana, Clayton County, Iowa. My birth date was September 7, 1911.

MS. NORTON: What were your parent's names?

MR. PALAS: Frederick A. Palas and Matilda Louise Palas.

MS. NORTON: What were their jobs, and education?

MR. PALAS: My father was originally a farmer in northeast Iowa. He left farming and went into the lumber business at a small lumberyard. [He was also] the community farm manager.

MS. NORTON: And your mother?

MR. PALAS: She was a housewife. She was quite active in the Lutheran Church.

MS. NORTON: Where did you spend your early years?

MR. PALAS: My early years were spent either on the farm, or working on the farm and attending school.

MS. NORTON: In Iowa?

MR. PALAS: Yes, in Iowa.

MS. NORTON: And how did you spend your early years?

MR. PALAS: Well, I spent enough time farming. I was dairy farming back in the days of hand milking. I spent a lot of time under cows, freezing in the wintertime and swatting flies in the summer time and I decided that I preferred not to be a farmer.

MS. NORTON: What jobs did you have as a child?

MR. PALAS: Well that was it along with mowing lawns and tending livestock.

MS. NORTON: What hobbies or books or events influenced you the most?

MR. PALAS: My interest at that time was pretty much active in fishing and hunting and sports, athletics principally. [I played] baseball and basketball.

MS. NORTON: What High School did you go to? And when did you graduate?

MR. PALAS: Luana High School. I graduated in 1926. Then I attended the University of Iowa at Ames for a year and the University of Iowa at Iowa City.

MS. NORTON: What degree did you get when you got out of college?

MR. PALAS: I had one year left to finish when the big Depression came along. Business had gone rather bad and the banks were closing.

MS. NORTON: What aspect of your formal education equipped you for the future?

MR. PALAS: Well, at the University of Iowa I had some Biology and Anatomy. I taught school for one year in Iowa. The big Depression ended a teaching career for another beginning teacher and myself because the schools didn't have enough money to keep us on. I ended up getting a job in the Post Office in the little town of Watseka, Wisconsin. I worked there for a couple of years. Prior to that I played some semi-professional baseball. Then I decided that I'd get prepared to go to work in Wildlife Law Enforcement. I took the competitive exam in Wisconsin. Back in those days, that was in 1935-36 jobs were scarce. There were over three thousand of us that took the exam. There was a rigid physical along with mental. I was fortunate to be one of the top twelve that was hired for the following fall. So I went to work for the Wisconsin Conservation Department in 1937. As a result, I stayed with them for several field jobs as a Wildlife Enforcement Officer in Wisconsin. I left them in the fall of 1942 and enlisted in the Marine Corps in the Reserve. I was put on active duty after the Wisconsin Deer season, which ended in November. I went on active duty in January of 1943. I was assigned thirty-one men in Green Bay and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. We shipped out by train.

World War II was on then, of course and we shipped out by train to San Diego and went through the San Diego Boot Camp. It was rather interesting, at the same time I arrived out there, there was a young man by the name of Tyrone Powers. Some of the older folks would remember Tyrone Powers the movie actor.

MS. NORTON: I remember him.

MR. PALAS: He was assigned to Platoon 3, and I was assigned to Platoon 4. We both ended up as 'Honor Men' in our respective Platoons, and lived together in the DA. Those were the Drill Instructors huts. We got to be quite close friends. And we both took the Office Candidates School exam along with many others, but both of us were selected. In March why, we were sent out to Quantico, Virginia. World War II was on, and both us got Commissions. I remember being commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the U. S. Marine Corps Reserve on June 16, 1943. Tyrone Powers was also a Second Lieutenant. He was with the Marine Corps for publicity purposes, where I was just a common GI at the time. I was assigned out to a replacement battalion at Camp Matthews, California. We shipped out of December 6, 1943 for the southwest Pacific on the small Delta Brazil. It was a small luxury liner that had eight hundred marines, plus the crew. There were bomb scares on at that time too. The night we shipped out, if I recall correctly, a small "Jap" submarine had got by the torpedo nets in San Francisco Bay. It got in there and lobbed a couple of shells, but they didn't do any damage. We went out under complete 'black out security' in rough weather. We stopped at New Caledonia on Christmas day and for New Years Day we were at Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides Islands of the southwest Pacific. It was rather interesting that day, Gene Tooney, he was a former Marine, and had been Heavyweight Champion of the World was there and met with a number of us troops in the Officers Club. We then shipped out of there a day later and landed in Guadalcanal, I think on the 8th or 9th of January in a pouring down pour of rain. We set up camps in what had been a Lever Brothers Coconut grove. Tents were assigned to us, and we set up tents. Mosquitoes were there by the millions at that time. The "Japs" had been pretty well subdued in Guadalcanal when we arrived there. We went into training with the 3rd Marine Division as replacements as they came back from Bougainville. As a result of, they suffered quite a few casualties. The casualties were more severe from the mosquitoes. Malaria was deadly at that time. A lot of us [got it]. I was fortunate to escape malaria. But there was a new drug that was assigned to everyone at the time; Atebrin [sic], which was a little yellow pill. We took a couple of those every morning. It was an Officers responsibility, I was a Second Lieutenant at the time, that the men under your command which were oversized Platoons, would get their Atebrin. Some of the fellows got pretty clever. They would pretend to be taking it, and pretend to be swallowing, but later on they'd spit it out. Actually, I think the Atebrin was quite effective because I was very fortunate. I never did get Malaria, where some of the fellows that spit out the Atebrin ended up with Malaria. That was probably more deadly than if you had taken the troops.

MS. NORTON: How many years were you in the Marines?

MR. PALAS: We trained for the Mariana campaign and the landing on Guam, why I was in charge of thirteen men to set up a Command Post of the Commanding General. We got in there on the third wave that day. The Japs had the high ground and they gave us quite a pounding. Seven of my men and myself were hit that day. I had my helmet blown off and took some mortar fragments.

MS. NORTON: How many years were you in the Service?

MR. PALAS: Approximately four years. After that I was in the Naval Hospital from that day of the landing.

MS. NORTON: Did you get any decorations from the War?

MR. PALAS: Yes, well the one decoration, which is the one decoration that you don't ask for, the Purple Heart. That's for anyone who is wounded in action. I received that award on September 14, 1944.

MS. NORTON: You were not married yet, when you were in the Marines?

MR. PALAS: I was married and my first wife and I separated. As a result we were divorced. I came back and I was released from the Naval Hospital in Great Lakes, Illinois on December 24, 1945. I was still on limited duty. The War was over by that time. I went back and was employed by the Wisconsin Conservation Department, which had a right for return. So I returned there and went back on active duty the day after Christmas with them. I was ordered to go to Wautoma, Wisconsin. At that point I was in good standing with the Conservation Department and was a rather select spot. I got to go there and stayed there. I came in as a stranger in town. The next morning I went to the little local bank to deposit a little bit of money that I had managed to save and hang on to from the Marine Corps. When I deposited the money at the Bank, an attractive young woman took the money. A couple of weeks later I happened to meet her again. We became acquainted and she subsequently... the next June we were engaged and we were married in September the next year. That's my wife Carol.

MS. NORTON: Where did you get married?

MR. PALAS: We were married here at Osseo, Wisconsin at Elk Creek Lutheran Church. It was one of the rather lucky and fortunate days of my life because when I met my wife working at a Bank I thought she had money and she knows that I had a little money that I had deposited in the Bank. It ended up that neither of us had any money, but we had each other. And we were rather fortunate that as a result of our marriage we had five healthy, active children. There are four girls and one boy.

MS. NORTON: What are their names?

MR. PALAS: Carla is the eldest. Eldre is next. And our son William, "Bill" was in the middle. Lyria was next the girl and Brenda was the youngest. As a result all of those children have been married and raised families.

MS. NORTON: What are they doing now? Do they have professional jobs?

MR. PALAS: The eldest girl, Carla has done some volunteer work in Atlantic City, New Jersey. She is licensed as a teacher. She may start teaching again. Both of her children are in college. Our second daughter is teaching. She graduated with a Master's degree in Audio-Visual Education from Johns Hopkins. She teaches principally visually handicapped children in Annapolis, Maryland. She has two daughters. One daughter is working for ALL, she is a graduate of University of Virginia. The other girl has just finished her freshman year at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Our son Bill is in Annapolis, Maryland. His wife is a teacher at Warren Wilson College and is just obtaining her Doctorate degree this summer in English Education. They have three children. Our daughter Lyria is teaching at Stanley Boyd, Wisconsin. She has two boys. Brenda is the youngest girl. She is in Annapolis, Maryland. She is busy raising four children; three girls and a boy. She also finished and got her degree in Education from the University of Texas.

MS. NORTON: Why did you want to work then, for the Service? [USFWS] You were working the Wisconsin Department of Conservation...

MR. PALAS: Principally, I was very much interested in Wildlife Conservation. And I had become acquainted with several of the agents of the Fish and Wildlife Service. Principally, Ed Carter was the one man's name. I had also had as part of my district in Wisconsin, the Menominee Indian Reservation and I had had experience and acquaintance with a number of Indians and the Indian Warden there. Carol and I were planning on and started a family. As a result, why, the pay, dollars and cents wise, plus the opportunity for travel. The state of Wisconsin seemed rather small to me after being half way around the world at a number of places. I decided that...

MS. NORTON: My next question was what were the pay and benefits like? A lot less than when you retired, I am sure.

MR. PALAS: In fact, you're correct. The starting pay at the time was... The State of Wisconsin at the time that I left was paying \$220.00 a month. The Fish and Wildlife Service was paying, I think at that time about \$240.00.

MS. NORTON: Were there promotion opportunities?

MR. PALAS: Yes. The promotion opportunities were quite substantial if you did your job. I worked as an Agent at Large in Region 3, which was at that time eleven of the middle-western States. I was assigned to Cairo, Illinois in Alexandria County. There was an attempt at that time, which the State of Illinois was opposing, an action by the Federal government, the Fish and Wildlife Service, to close a substantial area, which was a killing ground for the Canada Geese. This group that called themselves 'sportsmen' and 'hunters', but they weren't. They were just commercializing and capitalizing on the natural resource of the Canada goose population there. There was some gangster control and another agent and myself, Ray Shustrom was his name, we ended up with I think there were seven of these individuals kind of got us trapped in a place and threatened to kill us. But fortunately, they didn't.

MS. NORTON: Were there promotional opportunities for you back then?

MR. PALAS: Yes, the following year. I had been stationed right in Wisconsin. I was working out in the eleven middle-western states, but I was promoted as Agent in charge of the State of Missouri. Missouri at that time had just adopted a couple of years before a new State Constitution, which was modeled after the State Constitution of Wisconsin, which I was quite familiar with. I had worked with that, so as Agent in charge, I was able to help them a good deal with the training of their officers. They had I think ninety-nine officers that after their probationary period went to work as U. S. Deputy Game Wardens. And they worked under my supervision then of Federal work. It was rather interesting at the time because a lot of these were capable young men that were also Veterans of World War II. We had a good deal of rapport between us, an understanding. Subsequent to that, I think the opportunity for promotion came. "Flick" Davis who was my supervisor in Minneapolis, and "Jess" Thompson who was the Chief of Law Enforcement at that time in Washington and I was able to move on up as Assistant Supervisor to "Flick" Davis in Minneapolis. This was a happy move for me for promotion with better pay. It was also a happy move for my wife moving from Missouri. At that time we had three small youngsters.

MS. NORTON: How did your career affect your family?

MR. PALAS: Actually I think that the time they didn't recognize it, and I didn't always recognize it either, it was very difficult in some ways, but I think it actually strengthened the family. And education wise, why, the two older girls started their education in Minnesota. Then we were in Massachusetts for five years and the youngest of our children started school in Virginia. I had moved from Minneapolis to Boston as a Supervisor of Management Enforcement in the northeastern United States. That was an educational experience not only for my family, but for myself. There was a vast change from being a middle westerner. Following that one of the rather interesting was meeting with a senior Federal Judge in the Boston office. He was a very fine gentleman, and we

met a little bit. I explained a few of the situations that we had developed and successful court cases had been appealed, and even been appealed to the Supreme Court which we had won on baiting cases in Ohio and Indiana and Illinois. He said, "Well Mr. Palas, this is the 1st Judicial District here, and we sort of take the lead on things. We do things the way we see fit". Which made it very clear to me. But fortunately, we did establish a good rapport there with the Federal Court system. Subsequent to that I think in 1964 I had been in Massachusetts for about five years and I was transferred to Washington as a Chief of Permits. My background experience was considerable for this with a good amount of investigation and so forth. I also had had considerable dealings with Canadians and also some of the foreign embassies, why, we were.... It was very interesting. The Japanese at that time were very much interested in Fisheries, and I developed a good rapport with some of the Fisheries people. It had also been determined that the Fisheries were covered under the Lacey Act, which defined them as wildlife, so there were many meetings. It was a wholesome opportunity. The family enjoyed it. Our three oldest children graduated from Mount Vernon High School. We lived about a mile from Mount Vernon in Virginia. I retired in 1973. Just prior to retirement, the last year or so in the Fish and Wildlife Service was a rather difficult situation because it ended up under Mr. Nixon... I won't call him a gentleman; he was later on a convicted criminal. [There was] Mr. Watts, and some of the instructions that were handed down... I knew my way around enough legally and things, that I decided that rather than to buck that, I'd take a retirement, which I did.

MS. NORTON: That was before you left the Service? [End of tape #1]

MS. NORTON: What sort of training did you receive for your jobs?

MR. PALAS: Well, training I received originally of course I had had wildlife training, and some education. One further thing; the Department of the Interior decided that Treasury Enforcement Officers, and we also had the same authority specified on Wildlife work as Secret Service and other Agents, so they selected six of us to go to Treasury Enforcement School. That was back in 1956, I believe, in Washington, D. C. At that time, why, there was a class of approximately sixty. It was a rather interesting. With my Marine Corps training, and also Officer Candidate training at the Naval Academy. This Treasury Enforcement had to do with helping the President enforce the National Firearms Act and some of those things. I vividly remember that two young Jordanian officers were brought in and given some of the same training at that time, which was supposedly "super secret", in those days. We were not to let out, but the government must have had some trust in the Jordanians at that time to bring these fellows in. And they were sharp young men.

MS. NORTON: What kind of hours did you work?

MR. PALAS: The hours were dependent on... why; if you were in the field, back in the earlier days agents worked when it was most productive. In Law Enforcement, it was the

time when you anticipated that the violators would be out. Other times, when I was working on Management, at times on the Canadian prairies, banding from daylight until dark. The same way with many activities like Wildlife surveys. Of course, those hours depended on the movement of the particular wildlife. We were dealing principally with migratory birds. It would be early in the morning, and also in the evening. There were investigations and things, and dealing with the public, and trying to keep your self fit for the occasion, which might be in dress costumes, and some irregular dress.

MS. NORTON: Did you witness any new Service inventions or innovations?

MR. PALAS: Some of the earlier innovations; one of them in particular involved Dr. Bill Elder who had been at the University of Missouri and was flouroscoping migratory birds, principally ducks and geese to seeing what their lead content was. This came not only from gunshot wounds, but also the lead content in their gizzards. This was found out to be in many places over heavily shot areas. Ingested lead in their crops was found to be very deadly. And it ended up to a change over, after considerable resistance by some of the ammunition companies, they finally went along with it and adopted steel shot for use of migratory waterfowl. They did away with the lead shot. Then many other states followed that subsequently too.

MS. NORTON: What support did you receive locally, regionally or federally?

MR. PALAS: Generally speaking, the support, if you are doing your job and your superiors had confidence in you, why; the support was excellent. There were a few exceptions that I had mentioned back in political days when there was a switch there from ...over in the Nixon years when things got tough and tougher.

MS. NORTON: How was the Service perceived by people from outside of our Agency? How do you feel they were thinking about us?

MR. PALAS: Back in those days, why; it as an educational process and it still is. Although I think that the percent in increase of population and the decrease of hunters and so forth is something that is quite a change. Also, I have observed a great change in population from the middle-west where a lot of the people are agriculturally based, like where I was growing up, were acquainted with hunting; and moving out the New England are where there was much greater opposition to hunting that there was in favor of hunting in pubic opinion. In many instances it was very adverse to such brutal things as killing beautiful birds.

MS. NORTON: What did you think of Agency and community relations?

MR. PALAS: Community relations I found in my experience was that pretty much, you made you own. And if you worked at it intelligently, why; you were able to do very well.

MS. NORTON: What projects were you involved in?

MR. PALAS: Well, I am trying to think back to some of the interesting projects. One of the really interesting things was the importation of fish and wildlife. Some of these things that occurred back in those days were probably; one thing was that through the cooperation of some of the Fisheries people and our Law Enforcement work, and some of the investigative things, we were able to determine that Red Spot and Gill disease and so forth, could be imported and was imported from Europe into the United States. So there began some control over that importation later on. There was the same thing working with the Department of Agriculture on some of the wild animals on hoof and mouth disease. We quarantined animals. One thing in particular which I had personal interest in was that there were

MS. NORTON: Did you have any major issues that you had to deal with? And if so, how were they resolved?

MR. PALAS: One of these issues was the importation smuggling of some of the wildlife dealers at that time. They were trying to evade the law. And the importation of a number of these animals was under clouded. There were clouded titles because it ended up that with the cooperation of U. S. Customs on wildlife work. I had been able to develop that and as a result we were able to [stop] importation of Orangutans. These were animals that were being decimated. They were bringing a fancy price at the zoos and things. So we were able to, through our investigations, to track and animal if it was shipped out of Shanghai and from Malaysia to England. Then it was shipped into Washington, D. C. on a Saturday night, which was planned. I know it was by planning because it was thought that it was a time when neither Customs would be especially alert, or Fish and Wildlife Service would not be alert. But I remember that the Customs Agents and I were quite sure that this animal as apt to be coming in. The Customs agency that I developed a friendship with was Abbie Greenburg, and Abbie was a Jewish boy out of New York. He happened to be on duty that night. And I happened to be in Washington at the time. I was at a Saturday night bowling tournament when I got a long distance call from Abbie out at Dulles Customs. He said, "Bernie, that you? We got the son of a bitch!" He meant that we had the Orangutan, and it was a nasty cold night. I ended up the bowling tournament and went out to the airport myself and identified that this young Orangutan. We got the cooperation of the National Zoo who came out then and picked the animal up and took him in to the D. C. National Zoo where he was put into quarantine. This particular animal was recovering. He was pretty much about half frozen to death and small. He was estimated to be about a year old. The next morning he had recovered enough and he'd got in and picked the lock and got in and broke a gallon bottle

of Methaline blue and flooded some of their lab. After that he was names Dennis the Menace. The court procedure on that ended up in Alexandria, [Virginia] in the Federal Courts. And Dennis was assigned as a ward of the government with a determination. I helped to select that he went to the Henry Dollarly in Omaha, Nebraska where they needed a young male. Subsequently, Dennis lead a rather, I suspect for a young healthy male Orangutan, because he fathered a number of Orangutans in a number of Zoos throughout the United States! This is one of the rather interesting things that I think back about.

MS. NORTON: What Presidents, or Secretaries of the Interior or Directors of U. S. Fish and Wildlife did you serve under?

MR. PALAS: Dan Jansen was our Regional Director in Minneapolis. He subsequently moved on up and became the Director of Fish and Wildlife. Subsequent to that John Gottschalk served as the Director.

MS. NORTON: Did you find that changes in Administration affected your work at all? Like if they were Democrats or Republicans?

MR. PALAS: Generally, it appeared back in those days that the administrations of the Republicans were pro-business and were not as supportive generally speaking. There is some variation of that because we had excellent support in some of the states, depending on the U. S. Attorney's office. Generally speaking, we were able to develop good cooperation most everywhere. It didn't just come overnight. A lot of it was a result of a lot of hard work.

MS. NORTON: What was the high point in your career with the Fish and Wildlife Service?

MR. PALAS: I suspect that several high points were that, of course there were the promotions, and winning some of the things that we had striven for. And also, some of the high points that I felt were that some of the agents that started, I was instrumental in helping, or selecting and developed into very excellent, able officers. Some of those did some excellent work. Fred Jacobson was one that had been a former Wisconsin Warden. Jimmy Robinson was another agent. I had also worked with Chuck Niffonson when he was in Ohio. And there was Marshall Stennent.

MS. NORTON: Did you have a low point in your career?

MR. PALAS: Well, there were some things that were disappointing at times. I think that perhaps this one time that was a low point was when I had been a bit of an idealistic and when the Secretary of the Interior handed on down Watts. I was able to handle that

alright because I was thinking that I would continue to do the right things the way I saw them, and legally. As a result, if I could refuse, which I could, I could retire.

MS. NORTON: What was your most dangerous or frightening experience? Or did you have any?

MR. PALAS: Oh yes, there were number of frightening experiences. That is, can you believe the guy when he says, "I'm gonna kill 'ya!'"? You kind of look at him, and size him up and say, "Hell, I hope you don't. You'd better change your mind because you'll end up in jail!" These are some of the things at times, you ended up with.

MS. NORTON: What was your most humorous experience?

MR. PALAS: It depends on the circumstances at the time. I remember one time that a fellow who was a recognized violator and was always stepping over the limit one way or another that he could. This was back in the Wisconsin days. His name was Charlie and he had a young fellow working for him. They were evading the fishing laws. Finally, we did catch with what was considerably over the limit of fish early one morning, just at the break of day. Charlie was there, and another Warden and myself. This young fellow said, "God, Charlie, I told you we shouldn't do this!"

MS. NORTON: What are some of the changes that you have observed in the Service since you retired, or even while you were still working?

MR. PALAS: Some of the advancements in technology of course were taking place. Going from the use of mechanical devises, and the use of helicopters and photography and also audio-visual things; setting up cameras and listening devices and things like that.

MS. NORTON: So, what are your thoughts on the future for Fish and Wildlife?

MR. PALAS: Well, some of the things that I see now in the vast changes in the baiting laws, and some of the organized resistance, which has been and continues to be not only on migratory birds but other wildlife. One of the recent, up-to-date things, which have been observing rather closely, is the wasting disease here in Wisconsin on Deer. I noticed from the headlines of the newspaper yesterday or today that there has been a substantial number of permits issued; I think five hundred were issued, to kill Deer. And this is in the month of June, which is usual. They are trying to determine if these animals have the wasting disease. If they do, and it's apt to spread, it will be deadly on the entire Deer population through a lot of the states east of the Mississippi River at the present time.

MS. NORTON: Where do you see the Service heading in the next decades?

MR. PALAS: From my viewpoint, and my viewpoint of course is presently after a number of years, and I am interested. But I also have to accept pretty much the information that is put out by the news media whether it television... and some of their viewpoints may be commercially biased; it seems to me at times.

MS. NORTON: Do you have any photographs or documents that you'd like donate or share with the committee for the Archives?

MR. PALAS: I have several things here that I am rather proud of, which are my personal hand-me-downs. They are posted here right over my desk, here in my room. This is the U.S. Department of the Interior-Fish and Wildlife Service from when I retired. Game Management. I have another one here that is for Wisconsin Fish and Game Warden from; this goes back a number years.

MS. NORTON: Whom else do you feel we should be interviewing? Is there anybody that you can think of that we should still interview?

MR. PALAS: Well frankly, I am not aware of who all you have interviewed for this, but anyone. It's rather interesting to me, having been retired...

MS. NORTON: When did you retire?

MR. PALAS: In 1973, so I've been retired for quite a few years.

MS. NORTON: Well, that just about concludes our interview, and we thank you Bernie.

MR. PALAS: I thank you Dorothe.

MS. NORTON: And if you'd like to have a copy when this is all typed up, we'll be glad to send you one.

MS. PALAS: Do that.

MS. NORTON: O.K. Thank you very much.